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ABSTRACT

After an extensive review of the literature on the theoretical underpinnings of humor in human interaction, a six-category typology of humor was developed and exemplified by examples from mass media comedy. Humor can first be divided into two major types: individual level humor or social level humor. These levels are then further divided into the following categories: (1) bisociation and cognition; (2) arousal and physiological response; (3) managing social relationships; (4) social control; (5) reference group affiliation; and (6) disparagement. However, a single comedic event may possess characteristics that cuts across categories. (Forty-five references are appended.) (MS)

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Perspectives on Humor and their Application to Mass Media Comedy

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Perspectives on Humor and their
Application to Mass Media Comedy

Abstract

A 6-category typology of humor is developed and exemplified with mass media comedy. At the individual level, humor may occur as cognitive incongruity or high physiological arousal; at the social level, humor manages social relationships, effects social control, achieves reference group affiliation, or disparages others. While individual-level goals of humor are ideally met through mass media content, the social-level goals are achieved for media audiences only via a) vicarious participation in social interaction, or b) parasocial relationships with media characters.

It is probably true that humor is nothing that we can see, nothing real. How we define the term depends upon ideas that we have about it. To assume otherwise is to commit the sin of reification, and that, Gould (1984) reminds us, treats the abstract as possessing substance. One might argue that laughing is a fairly observable and real event; that is, we see people laugh and that, as Fry (1977) tells us, has all sorts of detectable physiologic manifestations. And while one might allow that laughter is certainly a part of humor, the latter is a more multifaceted construct (Helene, 1987). This multidimensionality has not been articulated in a typology of humor to date; this paper is an attempt to remedy that deficit.

There has been debate between those who see humor as a phenomenon that can best be studied in a social context and those who say that humor can best be examined if we look at the cognitive structures and physiologic systems of the individual. Berlyne (1972) has stated that because humor could be aroused in a single person that the "primary significance [is not] a social one" (p. 51). Fine (1983) argues that it has to be considered in its social context, as a part of a social relationship. Though often aligned with those who observe humor as a social phenomenon, Fry allows that people "can be funny alone" (1963, p. 22). Chapman, citing work conducted more than 50 years ago by Kerendine and others on children's response to humor, offers the view that humor occurs in a salient social setting. "Out of 223 situations where [children's] laughter was noted only 14 . . . occurred when with adults or alone"--the rest occurred in the presence of other children (1983, p. 136). However, Chapman does say that the only things that make two-year-

old children laugh are incongruity, a cognitive form of humor, and inappropriate social situations, obviously a social indicator.

Communication is a variable field (Fisher, 1978) that can handle many of those different facets, the cognitive, the physiologic, and the social. With the selection of perspectives, we can begin to narrow our focus to the particular aspects of the constructs that are of interest. Further, we can determine the "locus" of the communication act (Fisher, 1978) and from this determine a definition of humor. Fisher (1978) describes several perspectives that can be used in the study of communication. The purpose of this paper is to determine how humor might be examined at the individual and the social levels, and to draw upon some research and demonstrate how it would fit into the approaches under examination. Then, the paper will identify cases of mass media humor that seem to exemplify these two levels and their substantive subsets.

The aspects of the individual approach under examination will be the way individuals "bisociate" semantic and visual incongruity, and how they react to high arousal situations. The larger theories that apply here derive from Freudian theory, derivative psycholinguistic theory, and general systems theory. The cognitive aspects posit the notion of an active receiver who is capable of structuring unique messages from the surrounding world and making sense of them. The physiologic aspects posit a person maintained toward an internal systemic equilibrium by arousal forces in the autonomic system. From this point of view people can find humor on their own through the discovery of second meanings, incongruous mental images that need not be shared to be enjoyed, or they can be coerced by level of arousal toward predetermined choices and states. The

locus of the communication act here is the internal state of the person in question, including the "psychological filters" (Fisher, 1978) and the autonomic system. The freedom that the individual has in the appreciation of this type of humor has obvious implications for the functional role of mass media. An individual can enjoy a book of jokes or a video of Whoopi Goldberg's latest stage performance, for example, without interacting with others.

The social level will examine the role of humor as a social currency for the creation and maintenance of social relationships and the regulation of distance in those relationships. Reference group affiliation, disparagement, social relationship and control will be the discrete categories examined. Here the major theories that will guide our inquiry will be Lewinian field theory and systems theory, particularly as it is applied to dyadic, and small group levels. The social study of humor will have two separate loci based upon these different theories. First, we will structure our study of disparagement and reference group affiliation around a cognitive theory, Lewinian field theory. Using this approach social actors view their cognitive fields and mark all the social relationships that they acknowledge within those fields. A sense of "groupness" is said to be attached to the units that the individual actor feels that s/he belongs to. Humor, as we will see, is one way of tapping this field. Conversely, systems level analysis is not at all concerned with the individual attitudes that are crucially important to Lewinian theory. The general systems approach concerns itself with "how" actors shape the patterns of their shared social action. What is important is behavior, in this case how systems use humor to establish and maintain the

pattern of social relationships for purpose of cohesion and control.

The implications of such theories of social humor for mass media comedy forms are more complex than those for perspectives on individual-level humor. Social-level approaches view humor as a functional form of interpersonal/group communication (i.e., face-to-face interaction among communicants is virtually essential). However, as we will discover, there are at least two ways in which mass media content can participate in this process: 1) by providing the audience member vicarious participation in a humor interaction by showing or describing social joking behavior (e.g., the content of many television sitcoms) and, 2) by building an explicit parasocial relationship with the audience member in order to maximize receiver involvement (e.g., the "zoo" format for radio disc-jockeying, involving in-joking with listeners).

Indeed, Marc (1989) differentiates between sitcoms and television presentations of standup comedy by noting that the former generally involves conversation among characters in a given situation, which we as viewers ostensibly "overhear," while the latter is characterized by the comic speaking directly to the audience.[1] Both typically engage a social function of humor, but do so in different fashions.

After an extensive examination of literature relating to humor and communication,[2] we have developed a 6-category typology of humor. While the roots of the study of all six types lie in interpersonal and group interaction, we hope to show the complementary role that mass media comedy

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[1]Notable exceptions to this pattern include the classic cases of "breaking the fourth wall" by Garry Shandling and George Burns. The resultant incongruity will be discussed at a later point.

[2]The full 375-entry bibliography is available from the authors.

interaction, we hope to show the complementary role that mass media comedy plays in meeting human needs for humor. It should be noted that the reason for this preponderance of attention to interpersonal/group perspectives is due to a virtual ignoring of humor as an important process or content type by the mass communication literature. A handful of mass media-oriented pieces do exist (e.g., Harrison, 1981; Marc, 1989; Mast, 1979; Meadowcroft & Zillmann, 1987; Neuendorf with Fennell, 1988), but much of this limited collection is descriptive rather than explanatory in nature. The lion's share of work examining the importance of humor in human interaction comes to us from social psychology, sociology, and interpersonal communication. We hope that a serious consideration of the theoretic underpinnings of the humor process will be heuristic for mass communication scholars--both empiricists and critical theorists.

INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL HUMOR

I. Bisociation and cognition

Bateson (1953) offers the logical paradox as an example of "reframing," that exemplifies the sort of logical process at work when people examine the cognitive aspects of either their observable or mental worlds and find them funny because they have either rearranged a sequence of events and changed the syntax of those events or because they stop to look at a phenomenon in a new light, not unlike the process of perspective taking in the social sciences. Chafe (1987) also argues that humor is an adaptive mechanism that overrides logical schema. Humor permits the individual to view various occurrences in a cognitive frame that Koestler (1964) calls "bisociation." In this treatment humor is viewed as a creative process in which it is the product of a dual viewing of some

phenomenon in two mutually exclusive frames. As with Bateson, humor results in the rapid transfer of a logical pattern from one frame to another. For both approaches, context is a very crucial factor in finding an act accomplished through this insight funny, enlightening, or even profound. Thus when we reframe the syntax of the sentence "What are we having for dinner mother?" and place a comma before the word "mother," we have a sentence that one can laugh at if one has the reframing capabilities to realize that the evening's menu may not necessarily be maternal.

Similarly, Freudian theory and work in Chomskian psycholinguistics may give one further insight into the notion of bisociation. For example, the double entendre is one aspect of Freudian theory that is quite similar to bisociation. Here the actor makes a statement or says a word that simultaneously carries with it two meanings. One meaning presents the obvious surface meaning of the statement, while the second is a less obvious--and conceptually independent--rendering of the same communication. Humorist Steve Allen notes that people often ask whether his wife, who was born in China, has any Chinese blood. "Yes," he responds, "she keeps a small jar of it in the garage" (Allen, 1987, p. 225).

It is interesting to note that when Freud (1960) composed his classic text on humor, many of second meanings of his best examples were lost on audiences outside his native Austria (Bradshaw, 1977). Bradshaw argues that to be funny the joker and his or her audience must have an overlapping set of perceptions such as a shared understanding of semantics; syntactics; the phonological rules of language; the dialect

within which the joke is rendered; unimpaired speech hearing; memory; a mastery of the constitutive rules of the speech act; and a selective attendance to jokes.

We could add to this list a common understanding of cultural norms and artifacts. For example, in a recent TV performance, comic Steven Wright regaled, "I have a microwave fireplace. . . I can have an evening in front of the fire in eight minutes." This incongruous joke would fall flat if we did not share an understanding of what a microwave and a fireplace are--and an understanding of our culture's value for expediency.

We may also add to that the need for a shared understanding of the rules or syntax of the medium when humor is delivered in a mediated form (Salomon, 1981; Salomon & Cohen, 1978). Ernie Kovacs' brief 1950's series played with the conventions of the fledgling medium, violating the norms of "proper" TV production in unexpected ways. A more recent example of a comic who routinely creates incongruity by violating such production norms is David Letterman. One evening, when the cameras seemed to repeatedly wander from their intended target (his face), Letterman "took" the audience into the control booth to locate the source of the problem. "Oh, that explains it! I forgot--it's Dog Night!" he noted. All crew positions in the booth were filled by live dogs.

When one encounters incongruity (or more correctly, when one cognitively acknowledges or "creates" incongruity), says Shultz, humor results when that person responds to the less obvious or hidden meaning and not the obvious intended one. Shultz (1976) states that "in transformational grammar deep structure ambiguity occurs when two deep

structures can project onto a single surface structure" (p. 13). He offers the syntactically humorous interchange: "Did you know that the natives like potatoes even more than missionaries?" "Yes but the missionaries are more nutritious" (p. 13). The first statement has two meanings. In the first meaning the missionaries serve as the subject of the verb "like;" in the second humorous version they serve as the unfortunate objects of the same verb. And the second speaker chose to respond to the less obvious hidden meaning. A parallel semantic example is a takeoff on a W. C. Fields story: "Dr. Jones, do you believe in clubs for graduate students?" "Only if kindness fails." Here the humorous double meaning is semantic because it resides in the second meaning of the word "club."

In the visual domain of humor (Shultz, 1976) people process visual information more slowly if it is implicit in the image than they do if it is explicit. Rothbart & Pien (1976, p. 39) offer the cartoon of a man lying in bed with a small round furry object with wings and antennae. A woman is on the telephone in the next room. Here the example is implicit because there is no caption. Below that cartoon is another that is visually identical to the first, but this time the cartoon is captioned and thus given partial resolution. The caption reads: "No he won't be in today. He is in bed with a bug" (p. 39). One would posit that most people will resolve the second, or partially resolved incongruity more quickly than the more incongruous first example, resulting in greater humor. The cartoon's ability to quickly display visual incongruity is its forte (Harrison, 1981).

The Monty Python troupe has made a career of using film to create improbable visual juxtapositions. An exploding penguin on top of a television set, a bunny rabbit that rips open the throats of brave knights, and a housewife who finds herself on the deck of a rolling ship when she exits her kitchen door--all are stark in their visual incongruity and importantly, not easily achievable without the editing capabilities of film and video.

II. Arousal and Physiologic Response

Incongruity, according to arousal theory, increases tension and then finds resolution in the joke (often at the "punchline" point). This theory posits that humorous response is an internal matter, but rather than being a mental or cognitive process it is an actual physical response to humor. Here the actor attends to humor--and responds with laughter, or the general sensations that mirth can provide, for physical release. One theory, "the arousal boost" (Berlyne, 1969; Berlyne, 1972; Maase, Fink & Kaplowitz, 1985, p. 82) assumes that a pleasant level of arousal is optimal for achieving a humorous response and it is this physical response that is the real reward of humor. Conversely, the "arousal jag theory" (Maase et al., 1985, p. 82) sees humor as a function of the reduction of an unpleasant level of arousal which is given release in a punchline or humorous catharsis. Research by Goldstein, Harmon, McGhee, & Karasik (1975) suggests that people may anticipate arousal from humor and that it can occur by making physiologic measurements of individuals. They discovered that modest changes in arousal were most strongly correlated with humor and that it could be observed by use of a measure of galvanic skin response. Godkewitsch (1972), quoting Shellenberg's "inverted U

shape curve" hypothesis, states that "the relationship between arousal state of the subject and his [her] appreciation is curvilinear, rather than monotonic" (p. 144), with appreciation highest at a midrange level of arousal.

Godkewitsch argues that this idea about an optimal level of arousal may be similar to the Yerkes-Dodson "law" concerning optimal performance--that optimal performance occurs when drive states are intermediate. Humor is then optimal when it creates a median state of arousal. Mirth may actually raise the level of some drive states and represent a "psychophysiologic system" (1972, p. 144). Eysenck (1967) argues that a positive hedonic tone, the desire to maintain or prolong a pleasurable stimulation, is operative in human systems. Thus, when satiation of the external stimulus is achieved, that stimulus is no longer sought and the negative slope of the curvilinear relationship alluded to earlier emerges. Zillmann (1983) also presents a dispositional theory of mirth based on a set of theorems to determine whether a response was "hedonically" positive or negative. Meadowcroft & Zillmann (1987) found that women's tastes in television programing changed as they passed through the various stages of their menstrual cycles, positing that arousal may motivate an individual to make certain entertainment choices based upon the various physical states.

One can find little explanation for the popularity of stand-up comic Gallagher's finale other than high arousal--his "Sledgomatic" (nothing more than an old-fashioned sledgehammer) "slices and dices" watermelons and all manner of fresh fruits and vegetables, sardines and other unappetizing foodstuffs, splattering the first ten rows of his live

audience with goop. The live audience is clearly aroused and laughing, and the home viewer can vicariously participate. (Note that in this example, the presence of a live audience is essential.)

SOCIAL-LEVEL HUMOR

Two categories of social-level humor take a general systems approach to human interaction (Bateson, 1953; Fry, 1963), with an emphasis on communication behaviors and the resultant relationship established between communicants: Managing social relationships and Social control. Two others spring from Lewinian field theory (Pollio, 1983), with an emphasis on the cognitively constructed perceptions of relationships: Reference group affiliation and Disparagement.

III. Managing social relationships

Lamaster (1975) noted the continual banter in a tavern and that "[s]ome of the remarks that were made in this context might have provoked fights if they had been made by strangers" (Fine, 1983, p. 165). The crucial dimension here is context. And it is here that we shift from looking at the effect of humor on individual internal states, both cognitive and physiological, to an examination of how one might view humor in social settings.

Fine (1983) states that at heart of much comedy is the notion of metacommunication. Fine says that humor in a group is a way of indicating "a trusting communal relationship," a shared perspective, and communication of approval (1983, p. 173). Fine also notes that all-male subcultures may use humor as a method of self expression because serious disclosure of personal details with other men may make them vulnerable. Instead they use humor as a relational currency to say that each is of

equal status and that they accept each other upon that basis. Again, it is important to view "how" actors communicate, rather than merely view the content of their messages.

Humor can have either a homeostatic or a morphogenic feedback function in the process of an emerging relationship (Chapman, 1983). Play or humor is seen by Fry (1963) as a balance between "antithetical states--spontaneity and thoughtfulness" (p. 22). Systemic equilibrium is neither spiralled toward what Fry calls an "hysteria of spontaneity" or slowed to a "paralysis of detachment" (p. 22). Laughter, can also "correct the human tendency to become mechanical in its actions" (Pollio, 1983, p. 219). Thus, it can perform a cybernetic function for interactants in that it corrects the tendency to stray from the course of their humanity. It can be used to promote intimacy or a closing of distance in relationships or it can regulate and alleviate arousal when members of a dyad become uncomfortably close in their relationship. In the first instance it "allows [interactants] to stare continually to reduce interpersonal distance" (p. 147). In the second instance it allows interactants to move apart and look off into space and impede the change that may be presently occurring in their relationship.

Thus, week after week, millions of viewers tune in to vicariously experience the sparring of barflies in the long-running television series "Cheers." The continually fluctuating relationship of Diane and Sam (and more recently, of Rebecca and Sam) is a perfect example of the type of cybernetic process described above. Humorous give-and-take brings them closed together tantalizingly, teasingly. Then, when their intimacy grows

to an uncomfortable level, humor is used to alleviate the tension and distance them.

IV. Social control

Fry in his classic study (1963) noted that hens interacted within a "pecking order." When one understands the group function of social power this occurrence becomes important to the study of human communication. Chapman states that in a group a pecking order also exists that describes "who is the target of the humor, who instigates it, and how much response there will be from the group as a whole" (p. 149). Gruner (1978) claims that a joke is an attempt by one actor in a group or dyad to display his or her superiority over other members of the group. In dyadic or group relationships kidding can carry with it sets of prescriptions for interaction (Fine, 1983). Bateson (1972) describes the comic as being "symmetrical with his [her] environment" (p. 161). Fry (1963) notes that the role of the comic is one up and the role of his or her straight person is one down which completes a complementary dyad. Chapman adds that boys as young as seven see joking as a male prerogative, competing often for the privilege of sharing a joke.

Coser (1960) in her study of the use of humor by staff members in a psychiatric hospital observed that doctors were far more likely to be the source of jokes made at the expense of nurses and interns than were they to be the butt of jokes made by the latter groups. Group leaders are seldom lampooned, and when they are, nobody laughs, according to Fine (1977). Only through the vicarious participation of mediated humor can we enjoy ribbing "the boss," reversing the one-up/one-down configuration for just a short period of time. Much of the popularity of the film "9 to 5"

was attributed to the successful ridicule and subjugation of a superior by subordinates, a highly unlikely reversal of the social order in real life which was enjoyed vicariously, and with obvious relish, by the working stiffs of America.

V. Reference group affiliation

Similarly, actors in a social field can use humor as a form of identity with a particular group or an idea. They achieve what Lewin called "groupness," or a sense of belonging. Pollio (1983) offers that in Lewin's theory, humor occurs "against the more extensive background defined by society, other people, and the specific person" (p. 214). The crucial difference between this notion of field theory and the notions about social relationships in the preceding discussion is that field theory is primarily concerned with the social attitudes of the individual, the cognitive view of the world that the subject possesses, rather than the general systems level creation and maintenance of relationships.

Dundes (1987) shows that humor can serve as a collective social mechanism for coping with even the most tragic of occurrences. He cites jokes about the Kennedy assassination (e.g., "What did John-John Kennedy get for Christmas?" "A jack-in-the-box." (p. 73)); the 1986 space shuttle disaster ("What was the last thing that went through Christa McAuliffe's head?" "Her ass." (p. 74)); and the Chernobyl nuclear disaster ("What is the weather like in Kiev?" "Overcast and 10000 degrees." (p. 77)) as examples of humor that serve the collective social function of healing deep wounds. The subject matter of such humor is often taboo and to use it successfully in a group setting--without getting punched--requires fairly strong affiliation with the group (Pollio, 1983).

In the same way that Johnny Carson's jokes about Ed McMahon's drinking and Doc Severinsen's wild taste in clothes are intended to make us feel like "one of the gang," rather than isolated viewers in a sea of millions, lame jokes on the various home shopping networks are attempts to give the viewing audience the feeling of belonging to a "club."

One additional affiliation technique used exclusively by the medium of television is worthy of note--the use of the laugh track. Television humor has, over the years, replaced the humor of live theatre, vaudeville, and films to a large extent. In all of the latter, the experience was communal, and part of the audience's enjoyment came from the affiliative feeling, people got from sharing a laugh with others.

Research supports this notion with the finding that the presence of a laugh track results in greater laughing behavior, but does not consistently lead to greater humor evaluations of the content being viewed (Chapman, 1973; Leventhal & Cupchik, 1976; Neuendorf with Fennell, 1988).

VI. Disparagement

Zillmann and Cantor (1972) note that disparagement is a key variable in determining whether humor is appreciated or not. If there is significant resentment between two groups then humor that is at the expense of the disparaged group is considered funnier than that which is directed at members of the favored group. What is also interesting according to Chapman (1983) is that children as young as four conform to this dispositional notion about humor. Women, Chapman (1983) notes, employ sexist humor in which men are the butts. Conversely, men likewise employ sexist humor in which women are the butts. And humor of the disparaging kind can build cohesion, a sense of "groupness" among members

of the group but, as Fine points out, at the risk of provoking intergroup conflict (1983). La Fave (1977), Martineau (1972), and Zillmann and Cantor (1972) have demonstrated how group cohesion is solidified and dislike for an outside group can be intensified by aggression toward an outside group.

"Nothing is funny to everyone and anything seems potentially funny to someone" write La Fave, Haddad, and Maesen (1976, p. 85). Fine (1983) relates La Fave's work on reference groups when he tested members of four different religious groups. When the group which was humorously disparaged is one to which the subject was antagonistic, the subject rated the humor as funny. However, when the same joke lampooned the group to which the subject was a member any hint of humor quickly vanished. Furthermore, disparagement may not be considered very humorous if the disparaged groups shares many of the characteristics of the perceiver's group. Fine (1983) tells how, in 1934, Smith and Murray used an anti-Semitic text that made light of the stereotypic parsimony attributed to Jewish people. They correctly assumed that Gentiles would find the story funnier than would Jews. However, when they changed the story to one about a parsimonious Scotsman (another group stereotyped as cheap), Jewish people still did not find the story funny as was expected. The reason for this, the researchers said, was that Jews could sympathize with any group of people that had been labeled as cheap because of their own perceptions about prejudice concerning that trait.

Scogin and Pollio show that most humor is "directed at some specific person" with "a deprecating tone" (Pollio, 1983, p. 219). They posit that being the target of such a remark is a sort of rite of passage and shows

that the person "can take it." Joking in small groups forms a big part of the overall communication. Joking is a way of getting a rapport concerning sensitive areas of life "without fear of contradiction" (Fine, 1977, p. 331).

Dundes describes how humor can be used to socially distance a group (in this case homosexuals) and an event or condition (in this case AIDS) from the rest of society, or at least from groups using the type of humor (e.g., "What's the difference between Staten Island and Rock Hudson?" "The first is a ferry terminal."). Zillmann offers that most humor in his dispositional model emphasizes disparagement rather than the enhancement which one might infer from "being one of the boys or girls" who "can take it," the rite of passage in the foregoing examples. Disparagement, Zillmann and Cantor (1976) argue, is most fun when the person so disparaged is hated. "Affection for [the disparaged] would only spoil the fun" (p. 101).

Indeed, it may well have been the growing collective affection for the Archie Bunker character that led to the decreasing popularity of "All in the Family." Originally intended by producer Norman Lear as a vehicle for disparaging bigots, it mellowed over the years into a source of camaraderie and reference group affiliation.

Similarly, political cartoonists use the print media to lampoon our political leaders, in an effort to put them in a one-down position, and at the same time to be instructive to the audience through empowering them with a one-up position. Even standup comics get into the act. Criticizing the actions of our leaders in the Iran-Contra case, Bobcat

Goldthwait complains, "I don't want to be rude, but--weren't the Iranians the bad guys a little while ago?"

CONCLUSIONS

The typology of individual- and social-level humor that has been presented here was based on general social scientific theories of humorous communication acts. An attempt has been made to demonstrate that the mass media serve as important sources of each of the six types of humor, with some special caveats; while individual-level humor seems particularly appropriate for mass media content, the application of social-level humor is more complex. Social relationships, social control, reference group affiliation, and disparagement are all displayed in media content for vicarious audience enjoyment, and are occasionally intended for parasocial interaction between mass media source and audience member.

While this typology has been presented as six discrete categories, it is obvious that a single comedic event may possess characteristics that cross categories. Such cross-over media examples are of particular interest. For example, when George Burns or Garry Shandling breaks the fourth wall by addressing comments to the home audience, the humor is at least partially a function of the incongruity of the violation of the norms of video and the genre--sitcoms are usually set up to appeal to our need for social-level humor through vicarious participation. The humor is secondarily also a parasocial interaction aimed at managing a relationship between character and viewer. Political cartooning combines elements of both disparagement and social control. Jack Benny used to tell a trademark joke about a mugger who accosted him--"Your money or your life?" Benny paused. "I'm thinking, I'm thinking!" he finally responded. This

joke involves strong identification with Benny's established persona of a cheapskate (affiliation) and is also incongruous because the mugger's statement did not anticipate a response.

Norman Cousins and others have contended that laughter has curative powers (Cousins, 1979); Cousins utilized Marx Brothers movies and other humorous mass media in an attempt to cure himself of a life-threatening illness--and was successful. Even if Cousins' claims prove in the long run to be extravagant, at the very least laughter helps us get through the day. Literally thousands of communication studies have documented the negative impact of violent mass media content on receivers, and hundreds have assessed the impacts of pornography on its users. Yet, relatively few studies have assessed the content and impacts of humorous mass media. That such an important part of our lives has received so little research attention is regrettable. Comedy seems to be a ubiquitous part of our media content, and seems to have shifted in focus (a la the six types articulated here) over the years. The substance and history of mediated comedy could be assessed using this typology, laying the framework for further studies of the effects of mass media comedy.

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